

Tone Orthography and Pedagogy

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1. Introduction

The question of how to write tone has been explored in practice in a number of tone languages; a few articles have been written on what people tried and what seemed to be successful. Yet there does not seem to be a general consensus on how tones are best written, indeed, there are still many questions on how tone analysis should best be done. Even the symbols used for writing tone are not standardized. In Africa, for example, many linguists use accent marks to mark tone, while others use punctuation marks. The use of numbers, as in the Americas, does not appear to be used to mark tone in Africa. In these last few years, the body of information on the subject has been growing. Joseph Mfoniam (1990) has written an impressive dissertation about a controlled experiment on how to write tone done in Cameroon. Mr. Mfoniam is a native speaker of the language (Bafut) in which he tested four ways of writing tone. The results of his testing contradicted what had been previously reported on the writing of tone. Whereas the previous assumption was that high tone should be written and low left unmarked, Mfoniam found out that the contrary is true for his language. This principle has since been applied to languages as far away as Liberia with good results. Reports are coming in of languages where tone, written on the basis of marking high tone, were difficult if not impossible to teach—a situation rectified by simply switching to marking low tone as the basic tone and making the necessary adjustments.

Do not think that it is sufficient to mark only minimal pairs. This is not good for reading and hopeless for writing. Who wants to memorize a list of minimal pairs, that he then must access every time he writes a word, simply to know whether he needs to write that tone or not? As long as an orthography rule is linked to the pronunciation (barring purely phonetic phenomena), it is a simple rule which does not interfere with concentrating on the message one is trying to write. All other rules do interfere and are therefore difficult rules. They should be weeded out of all orthographies, particularly tone orthographies.

As for the symbols to use in tone orthographies, the most common practice in Africa is to use < ` > for low tone, < ^ > for high, < ^ > for high-low glides, < ^ > for low-high glides, and < ~ > for mid tone. What is in use in Bafut are < ' >, < ^ >, and < ~ > (though the language has seven phonetic tones). Those who advertise the use of punctuation marks for tone are quite happy with them. A test run in Liberia indicates that the actual symbols do not matter. They tested the same system, using accent and punctuation marks; the results were the same. The accent marks seem quite adequate and more acceptable than other symbols in that they look more like European writings.

3. Tone pedagogy

Another question that needs to be addressed is that of tone pedagogy. Out of the various approaches tried the most sensible one seems to be the following.

3.1 Lexical tone

Lexical tone is best introduced before the vowels and consonants are taught. Do it in some preprimer lessons, combining the teaching of the (visual) preprimer techniques with the sight word teaching and techniques. Chose minimal pairs which are easily illustrated and introduce them as you would a sight word with its illustration. Underneath each picture-word combination introduce a line which contains both words, from which the learner then has to chose the one identical to the picture-word combination at hand. Next the learner might "read" all the words in the line, which should be


simple to do by just paying attention to the marks that distinguish the pair.

Underneath the two picture-word combinations of the minimal pair (plus their exercise line) introduce another set of three lines in which the two words appear in different orders on each of the three lines. Again these can be read.

As an additional exercise, the learner can be presented with a set of words without the distinguishing marks. The learner can then introduce them on some of the words, so that the two words of the pair are again included in the exercise.


The following is an example of a tone lesson from the Fongbe language primer¹ from Benin, West Africa.

Figure 1. Fongbe tonal lessons




do

do	dô	dô
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agban

agbân	agban	agban
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dô

dô	dô	dô
dô	dô	dô
dô	dô	dô



agbân

agbân	agbân	agban
agban	agbân	agban
agbân	agban	agbân

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14

¹ Deha, Jean Jacques. 1992. *Wà xa fongbe: Syllabaire fongbe*. Cotonou, Benin: Société Internationale de Linguistique. pp. 14-15.